

## **Statement of Significance – Michigan in the War of 1812**

*Submitted December 2008 by the members of the Michigan Commission  
on the Commemoration of the Bicentennial of the War of 1812*

The War of 1812 was a defining event in the history and development of Michigan. For three years, from June 1812 to July 1815, the Michigan Territory was on the front line of a conflict between the United States, Great Britain, and the Native American nations of the region — particularly the Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi, and Wyandot. For the only time in its history, conventional land and naval battles were fought within the boundaries of our state. British forces occupied all or part of Michigan's territory for most of the war, and the residents suffered great physical and economic hardship. Although the end of hostilities resolved none of the issues that had provoked the fighting, the peace resulted in a careful definition of Michigan's boundary with Canada, greater territorial integrity as part of the United States, and the beginnings of large-scale migration and settlement that would, over the following three decades, lead to the development of the state that we know today.

By 1812 Michigan had been a part of the United States for just sixteen years and a separately administered territory only since 1805. It was a sparsely populated region, with Native American villages in many locations and Euro-American settlement concentrated in five areas: Detroit, River Raisin (Monroe), Mackinac, the St. Clair River, and Sault Ste. Marie. The residents had an economy based largely on the fur trade, with agriculture important in the more heavily populated locations in the south. Demographically, Michigan was inhabited by several groups of Native Americans — the Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi, and Wyandot — with their territories spread across both peninsulas. The majority of the Euro-American population was still largely French, with only a thin veneer of Anglo-Americans from New England and the middle states who had come to the territory in the years since 1796. Michigan had a small, free African American population as well. All of these groups would figure in the War of 1812, some with conflicting loyalties.

The war fought in Michigan really comprised two parallel conflicts. On one level, American and British military and naval forces clashed in a European-style conflict. But United States forces in Michigan and adjacent areas of the West were also embroiled in a frontier war against Native American groups, most of which allied themselves with the British and Canadians, though some supported the United States or advocated a policy of peace. The War of 1812 would be the last major conflict in which Native Americans living east of the Mississippi River put up an organized, military resistance to the advance of the American frontier. Much of this wilderness war was centered in Michigan, and Native Americans participated in all the battles fought there.

Michigan was a significant battleground during the War of 1812. At least seven land battles and four naval or amphibious actions were fought within its boundaries. Michigan served as a base for the first American invasion of British Canada in July 1812 and was the location of the first major event of the land war, the capture of Fort Mackinac by British and Indian forces on July 17. Detroit, the territorial capital, changed hands twice during the conflict, and one of the most famous slogans of American history — “Remember the Raisin” — recalled the fighting and subsequent events that transpired at Frenchtown (Monroe) in January 1813.

The conclusion of the war resulted in the return of those parts of Michigan held by the British. Michigan then served as the springboard for the postwar advance of American economic and military influence into Wisconsin and Minnesota. The Treaty of Ghent, which ended the conflict, mandated a postwar definition of the boundary with Canada, a task accomplished in the 1820s. The United States and Canada would thereafter go their separate ways of political development. In 1818, the Rush-Bagot Agreement limited naval armaments on the Great Lakes, a reaction to the powerful fleets constructed on their waters during the war. Peace also opened the way for the surveying of the southern part of Michigan’s lower peninsula, setting the stage for a rush of settlement by Anglo-Americans in the next three decades.

The War of 1812 left its mark on Michigan in many ways, and the bicentennial of that conflict is worthy of observance for its impact on the history and development of our state.

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